

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Testimony of U.S. Representative Wally Herger

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Congressman Wally Herger
Member of Congress
House Resources Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Hearing on HR 3467, The California Spotted Owl Interim Protection Act of 1998.
March 24, 1998, 10 a.m. 1334 Longworth**

Madam Chairman, Members of the subcommittee, I thank you for this opportunity to testify today on behalf of H.R. 3467, the California Spotted Owl Interim Protection Act.

For the past eight years, the forests and citizens of northern California have faced extreme uncertainty because of Forest Service policies on California spotted owl management -- an owl subspecies that is not listed as either endangered or threatened under the endangered species act. For the past five years, these communities have operated under a set of interim guidelines that were imposed without the benefit of an environmental impact statement and were designed to exist for just two years. Because these guidelines were intended to be in place for what the Clinton/Gore Administration considers to be a short period of time, Forest Service officials made many decisions at implementation that they considered to be insignificant or of little impact on local communities. Unfortunately, the guidelines have remained in place for the past 5 years and have imposed significant burdens on local communities.

Forest health has suffered dramatically because of fire suppression practices and federal policies, such as the interim guidelines, that have virtually eliminated thinning on our national forests. Much of our forests are now from 2 to 3 times denser than they were historically. Our forests are filled with dense underbrush and intermediate trees that contribute to an unnatural and extreme risk of fire. This same Forest Service policy has also resulted in severe economic impacts for many California communities. In 1988, more than 110 timber mills operated in California. Now, only 61 remain open. In my district alone 36 mills have closed their doors and a 37th is shut down until more local timber is available.

Since 1990, when the spotted owl debate earned national attention, California spotted owl populations have been found to be much higher than previously estimated. In 1995 the U.S. Forest Service reported 2,600 to 4,000 California spotted owls in northern California. Each year the total number increases as new nesting sites are confirmed. Yet the species is still managed as though it was in decline,

Madam Chairman, we have already spent enough time and money on the Forest Service's regulatory process. When Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman indefinitely suspended release of the revised draft environmental impact statement in 1996, we had already spent almost 6 years and close to \$7 million dollars on California owl studies.

Now we have indications that the administration has plans to bypass this process. and will disregard a

document that two scientific panels have called the best available science for spotted owl management. Instead the administration may implement new guidelines which would appear to be based solely on politics. If this were to be the case. it would sacrifice the health of our national forest system. We must not base this decision on politics

Madam Chairman, this bill, HR 3467 restores order to the California owl policy. It requires the Forest Service to use the best science available by completing its revised draft EIS to include plans for fire and fuels reduction. This makes the forests healthier and safer for both owls and humans. The legislation then requires the Forest Service to replace the over-due interim guidelines while the Forest Service comes up with a permanent, long-term solution. By relying on sound science we can maintain spotted owl populations and ensure jobs for our communities while restoring our forests to a much healthier condition.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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